

THE ROLE OF PLAY IN COGNITIVE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Play is a fundamental aspect of childhood recognized as essential for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. The study focuses on how different forms of play, such as free play, imaginative play, and structured activities, contribute to children's cognitive and social developmental progress. Researchers thoroughly review the empirical research on play, showing how free play, imaginative play, and structured activities support cognitive advancements, such as memory and problem-solving, and social skills, such as empathy and conflict resolution. The purpose of this research is to investigate the role of play in promoting cognitive and social development in early childhood. The study employs a qualitative approach to examine the relationship between play activities and cognitive and social development outcomes. It also employs the quantitative approach to analyze semi-structured interviews. A sample of 60 children aged 3 to 5 was selected from four preschools in urban and suburban areas to provide diverse insights into the developmental impacts of play. The methodology included participant observation and semi-structured interviews with both parents and teachers. For four months, children were observed during their regular play activities. Researchers noted interactions, behaviors, and engagement in various types of play. Cognitive development was measured through teacher assessments of problem-solving, memory, and language skills, while social development was evaluated based on observed interactions such as sharing, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Findings revealed that imaginative and cooperative play was strongly associated with cognitive and social advancements. Children involved in imaginative play showed greater creativity and language development as they engaged in storytelling and role playing scenarios. Cognitive tasks, like puzzles and building blocks, helped improve problem-solving abilities. Socially, children who frequently participated in group play activities demonstrated enhanced empathy, better communication, and more effective conflict-resolution skills. The study highlights the significant role of play in early childhood development. The findings suggest that play is not only a means of entertainment, but a critical process for cognitive and social growth. Incorporating diverse play opportunities in early education settings can support holistic development in young children, providing them with the necessary tools to succeed in academic and social environments.

Keywords: Play, cognitive and social development, early childhood